

Much-maligned warning system again attacked in wake of Chevron refinery fire in Richmond

By Matthias Gafni, Gary Peterson, Paul Rogers and Denis Cuff

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RICHMOND -- Residents, environmentalists and elected officials in the region's refinery belt took aim again at Contra Costa's community warning system Tuesday, citing reports of spotty alerts, silent sirens and tardy phone calls following Monday's massive Chevron refinery fire that sent hundreds of people to hospitals.

In a county that produces more hazardous materials per capita and square mile than any other county in the state, critics questioned whether Contra Costa County and its four oil refineries have an adequate warning system.

Meanwhile, the San Ramon-based oil giant said it was too soon to say what caused the toxic fire, the second Level 3 incident -- the county's most dangerous ranking -- at the refinery's No. 4 crude unit that processes diesel crude oil since 2007. Fire crews extinguished the fire Tuesday morning but kept watch over a controlled burn at the charred site.

Pollution officials said early indications are that emissions from the fire did not exceed health standards, but as of Tuesday afternoon, more than 560 people had sought treatment for respiratory problems at hospitals.

For Richmond City Councilman Tom Butt, who lives across Interstate 580 from the refinery in Point Richmond, the community warning system is a failure.

"It's an absolute disaster. It's never functioned properly," said Butt, who got an automated call at 9:30 p.m., three hours after the fire started. "The last time this happened, in 2007, there was all kinds of criticism then, and the people responsible were pledging to get them all fixed. Some of the same problems arose, and some new problems arose."

Automated phone calls

A Contra Costa hazardous materials specialist said the agency's automated phone-notification system sent out 18,800 calls Monday night to surrounding areas instructing residents to shelter in place. County officials targeted whom to call based on wind speed and direction and where the smoke appeared headed. They also sent out teams of air monitors and odor patrols.

"We're looking at if there's room for improvement for getting those phone calls out faster," said Maria Duazo, the hazardous materials specialist.

The county was notified of the fire by Chevron at 6:27 p.m. through a page, she said.

The refinery began monitoring a vapor leak at about 4:15 p.m. and evacuated employees at about 6:30 p.m. when it increased. The fire ignited shortly thereafter, when the vapor touched hot metal, said Chevron spokesman Sam Singer.

"That is what they believe caused the fire. They are looking into what caused the failure of the pipe," Singer said.

Chevron officials pushed a Level 3 notification button, mandatory at all Contra Costa refineries, that immediately alerts county hazardous waste officials, police, fire, air quality inspectors and media, along with sounding 20 sirens in the immediate communities surrounding the plant, Duazo said. Refineries are required to push the button if they believe the incident will affect surrounding communities.

The county also has the authority to expand the sounding of sirens based on monitoring feedback, Duazo said.

But many of those gathered in emergency rooms at area hospitals Monday and Tuesday complaining of respiratory ailments said they learned of the fire, either through seeing the smoke or getting phone calls from friends and family, long before they heard emergency sirens sound.

Some said that the main siren in Richmond's Civic Center didn't sound at all.

"The smoke seemed to go high up, and we were not getting readers for odors in communities, so it was difficult to assess the outside impact," Duazo said.

System 'deficient'

Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin said the warning system is "deficient," and she has concerns that the same No. 4 crude unit was involved in a Jan. 15, 2007, fire at the Richmond facility that led to a Level 3 incident and shelter-in-place warnings.

"I'm very concerned there's something in that unit that needs attention," the mayor said. "That's what we want to hear about it. Chevron should not be thinking of cost savings on this. Spend whatever it takes."

About 500 angry residents crowded the Richmond convention center Tuesday for a community meeting Chevron called to answer questions about the incident. They booed when refinery General Manager Nigel Hearne apologized again for the fire and demanded answers.

"You talk about shelter in place, but how long can I hold my breath," said the Rev. Kenneth Davis of North Richmond Baptist Church. "What about our dogs, our cats, our chickens, our horses and what about our children?"

Members of the nonprofit urban gardening group Urban Tilth held a protest before the meeting, where representatives threw food in a garbage can to symbolize what they said are the lasting effects of the air pollution caused by the fire.

"This is not just a toxic plume of smoke that blew away," said Doria Robinson, 38, executive director of Urban Tilth. "It's saved in our bodies and our lungs. It ruins our gardens. Chevron must be held responsible. We're not OK."

The county has already requested reports from Chevron, and county Supervisor John Gioia, who lives in Richmond, has specific questions about whether the company acted appropriately in the two hours from when the vapor leak was detected to the start of the fire.

"The question is whether they took the right steps during that time," he said. "It's better to be right than fast. But that will be a key question."

A half hour or so after the fire started Monday, Chevron officials reported the release of sulfuric acid, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and hydrogen oxide to the California Emergency Management Agency, as required under state law. That report listed the amounts as "unknown."

Possible fines

Meanwhile, on Tuesday afternoon, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced it will launch an investigation into the accident that could result in stiff fines against Chevron.

"There's a history of violations at the facility that have led to enforcement actions," said Jared Blumenfeld, administrator for the EPA's regional headquarters in San Francisco.

In 2003, for example, Chevron was required to pay \$275 million in a consent decree with the EPA to settle violations of the Clean Air Act and upgrade its refineries in Richmond and elsewhere. Three years earlier, the EPA fined Chevron \$20,000 for failing to immediately notify officials of a 500-pound leak of sulfur dioxide from the Richmond plant. And in 1998, Chevron paid \$540,000 to settle a water pollution case stemming from the Richmond refinery in which unfiltered wastewater was discharged into San Francisco Bay.

State air quality officials reviewed the data collected Monday night and found that none of their air monitors around the refinery showed levels of 23 hazardous chemicals that exceeded federal health guidelines. The reason: There was little wind, and the smoke rose in a column quickly above the community, then dissipated over the Central Valley, said Lisa Fasano, a spokeswoman for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

At Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo, patients filled the lobby of the emergency room and spilled out onto the sidewalk. Tremani Hughes, 18, of Richmond was waiting with grandmother, Julia Forte, 65.

"I have a headache, my eyes are burning, and my voice is going out," said Hughes, who was at a Richmond park when the smoke started pouring over the city.

Chevron announced in a statement Tuesday that it has set up a claims process to "compensate our neighbors for medical and property expenses incurred as a result of the incident," as well as to compensate nearby cities

for the cost of their emergency response crews. Those who wish to file a claim should call 866-260-7881, the statement said.

People also stood in line outside the office of attorney R. Nicholas Haney at 39th Street and Macdonald Avenue, where handwritten signs in the window advertised help with Chevron fire claims.

The office opened at 8 a.m. and saw more than 1,000 people throughout the day, filing clerk Lawrence Robinson said. Most clients complained of asthma, bronchitis and respiratory disease, he said.

Robinson turned one man away after the office had closed for the day.

"You ran out of papers?" the man asked.

"We ran out of everything," Robinson replied.

Contact Matthias Gafni at 925-952-5026 Follow him at [Twitter.com/mgafni](https://twitter.com/mgafni). Staff writers Kristin Bender, Sean Maher and Daniel M. Jimenez contributed to this report.